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Matthew 2:1-12 (v 2)
Epiphany 2021
Christchurch, Murray Bridge; Zion, Monarto

Jesus, King of the Jews, enables us to worship Him

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden wanted to be like God. They ate fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that they'd been forbidden to eat. Then they were afraid of God and hid from Him. From that point on, only God could bring about contact with Himself. In His mercy, He did just that. Although He knew exactly where Adam and Eve were hiding, Genesis (3:9) says He "*called to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?'*" As He spoke words of judgement and promise, God began to repair the immense damage that had been caused. Both our sinful nature inherited from Adam and the sins that we commit (including the good we leave undone) are like a vast chasm between God and us. We can't begin to cross that chasm from our side. But God out of His great mercy approaches us. He's dealt with sin by the cross of His Son. By way of His word and Holy Spirit He seeks us out to bring us to faith in His Son.

What God does to repair the damage caused by sin is at the heart of worship. Human beings devise all sorts of substitutes for true worship. They make offerings to appease their god or gods. Buddhists, for example, wrap saffron cloth around statues of the Buddha out of devotion to him. They try to rub little pieces of gold leaf on to a statue that might already be covered in gold. Secular Aussies might think that if there is a superior being, they've satisfied him by living a decent life. But if we think **we** can make God happy with us, we're totally deluded. Only God can bring about true worship. True worship is firstly about us receiving **from** God what **He** wants to give, that is, the forgiveness of sins won for us by the death of His Son. Having received such forgiveness from God, only then are we able to give Him right honour and praise.

The Magi in our text were led **by God** to worship the child Jesus. In the ancient world, magi searched the stars for indications of significant events. The Magi who came looking for the King of the Jews are usually called 'wise men'. 'Astrologer' would be a better way of describing them. Magi were part of the hocus pocus that surrounded King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, 600 years before the time of our text. In Daniel 2(:2) the word 'magi' is translated by Good News Bible as 'magicians'. God had given Nebuchadnezzar a striking and mysterious dream. It says in Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar sent for "*his fortune tellers, **magicians**, sorcerers and wizards*" to describe to him the dream and tell him its meaning. They weren't able to do what Nebuchadnezzar wanted. They were worshippers of false gods. Only the true God could reveal the dream and its meaning. He did so to Daniel, who was among the first group of Jews taken as captives to Babylon.

In the New Testament, the singular Greek word 'magos' is found in Acts 13, where again it's translated as 'magician'. When Saul and Barnabas came to Paphos on the island of Cyprus, they came across a certain 'magos', a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus (v 6). He was part of the hocus pocus that surrounded the proconsul. He tried to stop the proconsul from believing what Saul said about Jesus. Saul, we're told, filled with the Holy Spirit, called him a 'son of the devil' and an 'enemy of all righteousness (v 10).

Magi were experts at observing the heavenly bodies, but they were not wise men in themselves. Early Christians regarded them as being in the dark [Gibbs, 124]. Yet it was just to such ignorant people that God made the birth of Jesus known. **He** made them wise as He brought them into His light.

These Magi knew about the Jewish belief that a great King would be born who would rule the earth in peace. The star they saw showed them that the promised King had either been conceived or born, and they set out to find him. They didn't know where they would find Him. Their knowledge and reason told them to go to Jerusalem. When King Herod, paranoid in his old age [Gibbs 122] heard that magi were asking where they could find the newborn King of the Jews, he wasn't at all pleased. Herod wasn't Jewish. He was from Idumea. He didn't want a Jewish king taking his throne. "*All Jerusalem*" (v 3) was troubled along with Herod, because they knew what kind of king Herod was. He had already killed his wife Mariamne, who was of Jewish descent from the Maccabees, and at least two of his sons. [Josephus, *Antiquities*, books 14-18] People would have been afraid of who else was going to die because of Herod's displeasure.

Herod didn't know the Bible, so he had to call religious leaders together to ask them where, according to the Scriptures, the Christ was to be born. They gave the answer from Micah 5(:2). But it's interesting to see how Matthew quotes the verse. In Micah the Lord says that though Bethlehem is "***too little to be among the clans of Judah***", from her would come one who would be ruler in Israel. About Bethlehem, Matthew says, "***you ... are by no means least among the rulers of Judah***". In making this change, Matthew wasn't violating the text of Micah. Micah, after all, tells about a great King coming from little Bethlehem. It says in Micah that His coming is from of old, from ancient days, that He will shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord and will be great to the ends of the earth, bringing peace to His people. Matthew knew that, by the birth of this King, God had made little Bethlehem great. At the end of the quote, Matthew adds words that come from 2 Sam. 5(:2). They're the words, "***who will shepherd my people Israel***". These words were originally spoken by the tribes of Israel to David when he was only king of Judah. After King Saul died, representatives of the 10 northern tribes of Israel came to David to invite him to be king of Israel. They said, "***the Lord said to you, 'You shall be shepherd of my people Israel.'***" St Matthew knew that Jesus is the true, eternal shepherd descended from David and that's why he added to the verse from the prophet Micah, words spoken to King David,.

Matthew shows that Jesus is the Messiah and king from David's line who was born at Bethlehem to fulfill God's promises. The Magi, who were pointed in the right direction by the revealed word of God, were then guided by the star to where the Child was. When they entered the house and saw Him with Mary His mother, they bowed down and showed reverence to Him. They gave Him gifts fit for a king. They weren't politicians. They were naïve men. They were unaware of Herod's evil plans. God had to warn them not to go back to Herod.

What's amazing about this account is not so much the star, but the kind of people whom the Father drew to acknowledge the birth of His Son. Matthew emphasises it by adding the word 'behold' or 'look', when telling us that magi from the east came to Jerusalem in search of the King. They weren't wise, even though they were wealthy. They were steeped in paganism. But God had mercy on them. He made them wise by leading them to the child Jesus. By this He shows that He wants all people to acknowledge His anointed King who is the true light. They probably thought of Jesus as only a great King. We know much more about Him. We know that the light that shines from Jesus outshines the light of all stars, planets and novas. He is Light from Light, as the Nicene Creed says. Or as St John says, He is the true light that enlightens everyone (1:9).

Right at its beginning, this Gospel tells how foreigners were led to Bethlehem to worship the King of the Jews. At its end it tells how the King of the Jews, risen from the dead, appeared to the Eleven in Galilee, who also worshipped Him. Then He told them, "***Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them ... and teaching them***". Through being baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and through being taught all that

the Lord Jesus has commanded, people of every nationality are brought to Him to receive the forgiveness of their sins. They're given the life that was lost in the Garden of Eden. They're brought into loving fellowship with God and are made heirs of eternal life. They're enabled to truly worship Him.

Christ the King continues to bring His gifts to His baptised people—His saving word and His saving body and blood. He speaks His word of forgiveness to us so that by the power of His Spirit we might repent and believe and be saved. By speaking to us He also teaches us how to speak to Him. A very large part of the words we normally pray in the Divine Service are words He's firstly given us. In the order of Service we use the psalms and other verses of Scripture that declare who God is, how He's saved us through His Son and how He comes to save and forgive us in the here and now. So, for example, we pray the Our Father, words taught by Jesus that sum up all that we need to pray for.

He also feeds us with His meal: the wedding banquet of the kingdom of God. His body and blood that He took to Himself when he was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, He offered on a cross in sacrifice for our sins. He was raised from the dead so that He might give us His body and blood to eat and drink under bread and wine, for the salvation of our bodies. When the Magi came into the house and saw the child Jesus with Mary His mother, *"they fell down and worshipped him"*. The word translated as 'worship' includes the thought of prostrating oneself before a person and kissing his feet, the hem of his garment, or the ground. (I think of a resident at Riverview Lutheran Rest Home who was unable to get out of the bed she was lying in. When I'd place the consecrated host at her lips she would first kiss it before opening her mouth to receive it.) I hope it won't be long before, like the Magi, we're able once again to kneel to receive the body and blood of Jesus, King of the universe.

We need to receive the gifts He offers us so that we may worship Him with our lives. We need to be single-minded like the Magi who would have travelled for two or three months, depending on where exactly they came from. On their lengthy trip, they could have lost heart and turned back. They could have been distracted by new sights or by people they would have met on the way. But they kept their eyes fixed on the goal and pressed on. They were determined to find the great King who had been born.

It has to be like that for all whom God leads to His Son. Noah had to carry on preaching and building the ark while other people were having the time of their lives. Abraham was told to forsake his homeland and travel to a distant country. Joseph was sold by his brothers and taken to Egypt against his will. He could have disowned his God and his family when he was in Egypt. Moses, who led the people of Israel on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land, had to persevere with people who often disobeyed God. David before he became king was hunted and on the run for many years. He could have lost heart and given up. Prophets like Jeremiah were ignored and mistreated and imprisoned.

Will we let the 'good' life get in the way of our worship, or will we persevere as Jesus' followers? It was at great personal cost that the King of the Jews saved us. He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross, for our sakes. Risen from the dead, He now rules over everything. By His great love He gives us immense worth. He shares His treasures with us and guides us on our way so that we may come to Him, give Him due worth and dwell with Him in all His glory. Only be guided by His word and not by the powerful and deceitful Herods of this life. Resolutely worship King Jesus where He comes to be with us as our loving Saviour. Then both when your life here is brought to an end, and when He comes again in glory as King and Judge, you will joyfully worship Him in the splendour of His majesty in heaven forever.